

Volunteers in the Courts News

Winter 2004

Oconto County celebrates two years of teen court

It has been two years since the Oconto County Teen Court was launched, a milestone that was celebrated earlier this winter with a birthday party that featured a mock trial and remarks from Municipal Judge Douglas A. Kurek on the importance of this alternative forum for dispute resolution.

But the main cause for celebration is the court's substantial contribution to the welfare of the community. The 50 defendants who have gone through the court have contributed nearly 300 hours of community service time to non-profits throughout the county and panel members have discovered leadership qualities and learned the value of working with others toward a common goal.

"Teen Court has changed the way I look at things and how I think and interact with other people," one teen panelist said.



The Oconto County Teen Court panel takes the oath.

The panel

"Teen court is not just about the offenders; we are offering important leadership roles and opportunities for our youth," said Lisa Devine-Barribeau, teen court coordinator. The panel members who volunteer for the teen court have dedicated 500 hours to the program and are valued as leaders in their community. In addition to training, hearing cases, and making presentations to local groups, panel members participate in an annual community service project and help tutor offenders.

After attending a teen court workshop in 2002, panel members decided to add a mentor position. Now before an offender enters the courtroom, a mentor greets the person and his/her parents, describes court procedures, and answers questions. The mentor sits next to the offender and parents during the proceedings and serves as a resource after court as well.

High school students who want to be a part of teen court fill out an application and a panel of youth and adults interview each applicant. Offenders are not required to sit on the panel; however sometimes it is a part of the sanctions. One offender who was required to serve on the panel as part of her community service later applied to be a part of the teen court panel and was selected. "She is a valuable asset to our teen court," said Devine-Barribeau.

After panel members participate in teen court for one year, they are asked to share what they learned and how they benefited. They list the value of teamwork; learning about the court system; developing decision making skills; understanding the effects of crime; sharpening listening skills; and building youth leadership. "Experience in teen court is like no other," said Devine-Barribeau.

The Oconto County Teen Court is a University of Wisconsin Extension program with support from Oconto County Human Services, The Quality of Life Project, and the Oconto County Partnership. The court is for offenders between the ages of 10 and 17 who have admitted guilt for a misdemeanor crime or ordinance violation such as shoplifting, disorderly conduct, underage drinking or tobacco use, trespassing, truancy, possession of drug paraphernalia, or curfew violations. They also must be referred to teen court (most of the court's referrals come from the county's five municipal judges and two circuit court judges, and it recently has started receiving referrals from the Department of Natural Resources); and must have a parent/guardian who is willing to accompany them to court. A \$25 court fee is collected from the defendant at the hearing.

In addition to the Oconto County court, there are currently more than 30 teen courts in Wisconsin in the following counties: Barron, Bayfield, Brown, Buffalo/Pepin, Chippewa, Clark, Dane, Dodgeville, Fond du Lac, Iowa, Jackson, Jefferson, LaCrosse, Marinette, Polk, Portage, Price, Rusk, Taylor, Trempealeau, Vernon, Vilas, Waupaca, Wausau, and Winnebago Counties.

For more information on the Oconto County Teen Court, contact Devine-Barribeau at (920) 834-6852.

Wisconsin CASA Association helps counties start, expand programs



Marsha L. Varvil-Weld

Wisconsin CASA (court-appointed special advocates), an association started two-and-a-half years ago to help assure quality services and to assist counties interested in starting or building onto existing CASA programs, is off to a strong start. The association has welcomed a new board of directors (District I Court of Appeals Judge Charles Schudson is board president); developed a Web site; and currently is planning its third statewide conference.

The conference, scheduled for September at the Kalahari Resort and Convention Center in the Wisconsin Dells, is open to judges, attorneys, and others interested in learning more about abused and neglected children. More information is available on the Wisconsin CASAWeb site at www.wisconsincasa.org.

CASAs are specially trained volunteers who promote the best interests of children in cases involving allegations of abuse or neglect. Unlike social workers, they are assigned to only one case at a time, and make at least a one-year commitment to that case, providing continuity that may not be available from other professionals in the system. They monitor compliance with court orders and watch the family and school environments. In general, CASA volunteers visit with the child each week in the child's home and contact the schools, service providers, and others involved with the child on a monthly basis. The



They monitor orders and watch the environments. In

CASA files a monthly report that is forwarded to the courts, the social worker, and the guardian *ad litem*.

Wisconsin statutes stipulate the role and responsibilities of CASA and grant the CASA access to confidential records including school records, court records, social welfare records and abuse and neglect reports.

CASAs must undergo a comprehensive background check and complete 30 hours of training prior to assignment of their first case. CASA volunteers also must complete a minimum of 10 hours of continuing education each year. Each CASA program employs a paid staff member who is responsible for screening, training, and supervising the volunteers.

There are currently seven CASA programs in Wisconsin and one tribal court program. The Dane County CASA is the longest continuously operating CASA in the state (it was initiated in 1994 with the help of Judge Gerald C. Nichol) and has 41 trained volunteers providing services to 66 children. Milwaukee CASA recently restructured and now has 30 volunteers assigned to cases. Programs also are located in Brown, Columbia-Sauk (serving both counties), Fond du Lac, Kenosha, and La Crosse counties. The tribal court program, operated by the Red Cliff Tribe, is located in Bayfield.

Wisconsin CASA is a private not for-profit, grant-supported organization based in Portage.

Those interested in starting or expanding a CASA program may contact Marsha L. Varvil-Weld, executive director, Wisconsin CASA Association, at (608) 742-5344 or mlvweld@wisconsincasa.org.